

History of North Carolina

Senior Tar Heel Legislature

The North Carolina Senior Tar Heel Legislature was created by the North Carolina General Assembly with the passage of Senate Bill 479 in July of 1993 (G.S. 143B-181.55). Chief sponsor of the bill was Senator Beverly Perdue, now the former Governor of our state.

The Senior Tar Heel Legislature was established to:

- *Provide information to senior citizens on the legislative process and matters being considered by the North Carolina General Assembly.*
- *Promote citizen involvement and advocacy concerning aging issues before the North Carolina General Assembly.*
- *Assess the legislative needs of older citizens by convening a forum modeled after the North Carolina General Assembly.*

There is one delegate to the Senior Tar Heel Legislature from each of the 100 counties in the state. Most counties also have an alternate delegate. Delegates must be age 60 or older.

The North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services provides staff support for the Senior Tar Heel Legislature in cooperation with the 16 Area Agencies on Aging who are responsible for conducting the selection of delegates and alternates. The first meeting of the Senior Tar Heel Legislature was held on October 26, 1993. After that meeting, an Operations/Procedures/Steering Committee composed of delegates from 12 counties was formed to devise a framework for the structure of the Senior Legislature. Following several months of deliberations, key recommendations coming from this Committee included the following:

- *The Senior Tar Heel Legislature should be unicameral in nature.*
- *The Senior Tar Heel Legislature should develop a committee system. Issues Committees should be formed to provide a means for examining issues/matters of importance to older North Carolinians and Standing Committees should be established to handle organizational matters.*
- *Rules and By-laws should be developed to define how the body should operate.*
- *Officers should be elected to lead the Senior Legislature. These officers should be Speaker, Speaker Pro Tempore, Deputy Speaker Pro Tempore, and Secretary.*

Recommendations coming from the Operations/Procedures/Steering Committee were adopted by the delegates in early 1994 and the decisions made at that time have guided the Senior Tar Heel Legislature to this day.

Issues Committees of the Senior Tar Heel Legislature are: Crime/Safety/Security, Enrichment Opportunities, General Legislation, Health, Long Term Care, and

System/Service Access. All delegates are assigned to an Issues Committee.

Standing Committees of the Senior Tar Heel Legislature are:

Advocacy, Elections and Credentials, Finance, Public Relations, Resolutions, and Rules and By-laws.

Since the inception of the Senior Tar Heel Legislature, delegates and alternates to the Senior Legislature have undertaken a variety of activities in their counties to help inform and educate older citizens on matters before the General Assembly and to hear from people regarding their needs. These have included community forums, informational booths at health fairs, and meetings where legislators have been invited to explain pending legislation. Many delegates and alternates give presentations each month to local groups and organizations while others write articles for local newspapers and appear on local radio programs.

Currently, the Senior Legislature meets three times a year, usually in Raleigh, to study issues, to hear from key resource persons and state officials, and to develop recommendations to present to the N.C. General Assembly. Meetings are held in March, June, and October.

The Senior Legislature submits three to five priority recommendations to the General Assembly each legislative session. With few exceptions, the General Assembly has taken positive action, in some form or fashion, on these recommendations.

Among the key actions that the General Assembly has taken on recommendations include the following:

- Expanded Medicaid coverage to older and disabled adults eligible for Supplemental Security Income and to those with incomes up to 100% of the federal poverty level.
- Increased funding for home and community based services from \$9,232,454 in 1992 to \$59,850,958 in 2009
- Increased the Homestead Property Tax Exemption.
- Began a prescription drug assistance program that evolved into the current N.C. Senior Care prescription assistance program funded by the Health and Wellness Trust Fund Commission.
- Passed legislation to require criminal background checks of employees in adult care homes, nursing homes, and home care agencies.
- Passed legislation to provide for a long term care insurance option for active and retired state employees and their dependents as well as retired local government employees and their dependents (cost of coverage to be paid by employee) and to provide an individual income tax credit for the purchase of long term care insurance.
- Appropriated funding for the support of Area Agencies on Aging.
- Expanded funding to improve the timeliness of complaint investigations and monitoring in long-term care facilities.

- Increased funding to expand adult protective services in the state.
- Provided funding to ensure that the Medicaid Community Alternatives Program for Disabled Adults (CAP/DA) remains a viable service for older and disabled adults in the state.
- Passed legislation to increase consumer protections in the areas of telemarketing fraud and predatory lending.
- Provided funding to ensure the continuation of Project C.A.R.E. (Caregiver Alternatives to Running on Empty)

In advocating for their priority recommendations, the Senior Tar Heel Legislature collaborates with groups such as the N.C. Coalition on Aging, the Governor's Advisory Council on Aging, AARP, Friends of Residents in Long Term Care, Inc., and other senior advocacy groups to educate the public regarding issues.

Delegates and alternates from many of the 100 counties, often with the assistance of Area Agencies on Aging, frequently hold dialogue sessions with members of the General Assembly about priority issues. Delegates and alternates also meet with members of the Senate and the House in their districts and at their offices in Raleigh to discuss Senior Legislature recommendations.

A 501(c)3 charitable corporation, Friends of N.C. Senior Tar Heel Legislature, Inc. (name later changed to Friends of Senior Tar Heels, Inc.), was formed in 1995 to raise funds to further the purposes of the Senior Tar Heel Legislature. Funds raised by Friends have been used to provide scholarship assistance for delegates to attend meetings, to support educational programs, and to help defray the expenses of Senior Tar Heel Legislature statewide meetings.

A more comprehensive and detailed history of the Senior Tar Heel Legislature, for viewing as well as downloading, can be obtained by contacting John Thompson via email at: j.thompson@ncsth.org. Upon receipt of this request, an invitation email with instructions on how to view and download the STHL History Manual in its totality will be made available. Due to its size, the manual at this time could not be put on the STHL website.